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DECORATIVE ART IN PARIS.

THE NEW SEVRES PORCELAIN.

BY THEODORE CHILD.

THE eighth exhibition of the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs is now open in the Palais de l'Industrie at Paris. The programme includes stone, wood, ceramics, and glass in their various states and forms.

On the whole the exhibition is incomplete and unsatisfactory, and if we were asked to form an opinion of French art industries from the present show, we should be able to say but little to their credit. I have been told that owing to the stagnation of trade many important houses have refrained from exhibiting. On the other hand it is said that the lottery by which the Union Centrale is trying to raise funds wherewith to build a museum, and all the suspicious incidents connected with the drawing of that lottery, have brought the society into bad odor. However that may be, the present exhibition is very mediocre in every respect, and as far as the exhibits of private manufacturers are concerned, it deserves no special comment, except in very few cases. The exhibition of stone, both natural and artificial, is almost nil; the same may be said of the exhibition of wood—which does not include furniture, that section having

formed the main feature of a previous exhibition. In the department of ceramics, the tiles, ornamental bricks, terra cotta for architectural purposes, ceramic facings, etc., are all unremarkable from an artistic point of view. I do not even make an exception for the decorative panels of M. Theodore Deck, who remains exactly at the same point where he was six years ago. The collective exhibition of the Limoges porcelain manufactures comprises excellent current products, but very little original and thoroughly artistic effort. Indeed the only noteworthy and truly artistic exhibit I have discovered is that of Haviland & Co. In the department of glass, two houses come out well, namely, Champigneulle with painted glass windows, and E. Rousseau, who produces most wonderful glass, rivaling in beauty the *pietra dura*, which the Orientals prize so highly. But to speak frankly, with these few exceptions, there seems to me little or nothing to be learnt either in taste or in technical processes from the modern exhibition of wood, stone, ceramics and glass.

In the upstairs rooms of the Palais de l'Industrie, the Union Centrale has organized a retrospective exhibition of ceramics and glass of more or less interest, while the Ministry of Fine Arts has organised an exhibition of the products of the national manufactures of Sévres, the Gobelins and Beauvais. This is certainly the most interesting feature of the whole exhibition. The tapestries are very poor—not in quality but in design; they are a most eloquent proof that the race of decorative artists which existed in France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is now

almost extinct. The only artist employed in these national manufactories who has the real decorative instinct is P. V. Galland, and in my condemnation of the meagre, colorless, and poverty-stricken designs which form the mass of the productions of Beauvais and the Gobelins, I make exception for those of this excellent artist.

The Sévres exhibition is very important and very interesting. The Sévres manufactory labors under all the disadvantages of a State administration in Republican France; there is too much administration, too much bureaucracy, too much protection, and too profound a respect for form and tradition. Nevertheless of late years Sévres has been awakening to the fact that the English and the Americans are going ahead rapidly in artistic ceramics and the director and the chief chemist, M. Lauth and M. Vogt, have laid their heads together and invented a new porcelain, to which the name of *nouvelle porcelaine* has been given, and of which many specimens are now exhibited to the public for the first time. This *nouvelle porcelaine* is the capital subject of interest in the present exhibition of the Union Centrale, so I shall devote the rest of my space to describing its qualities and merits.

I may remind the reader that the first specimens of porcelain, which is a Chinese invention, were introduced into Europe at the beginning of the sixteenth century. In the seventeenth century, Poterat of Rouen succeeded in producing a translucent pottery, and porcelain began to be produced industrially at the manufactories of Saint-Cloud, Lille, Chantilly, Mennecy, Vincennes, etc. In 1756 the royal manufactory of Sévres was established, and has since existed as the property of the crown or of the state. The porcelain produced by the manufactories of the seventeenth century was what is called *porcelaine tendre*, being a mixture of sand, lime, and alkali ground up together with a little chalk or clay. The piece formed out of this material, after having been baked, was covered with a glaze of silicate of lead. This porcelain was very different from the porcelain of the east, and its chief merit was to give a soft velvety richness to the colors laid on it, which penetrated and incorporated themselves with the glaze and produced the illusion of homogeneous matter. It is, thanks to this quality, that we owe the beautiful, soft, rare and blue grounds of "vieux Sévres."

The *porcelaine tendre*, however, was inferior to Oriental porcelain in solidity and resistance to heat. But of what materials was Chinese porcelain made? The stammering science of the seventeenth century could not answer the question. Saxony, by some chance or other, managed to produce real hard porcelain in 1760; Louis XV. bought the secret for Sévres, but it was found that the raw materials did not exist in France. Finally, in 1765, the necessary earth was found at Alençon and Saint-Yrieix, and so Sévres began to make *porcelaine dure*. This porcelain is obtained from white kaolin clay rendered transparent by the addition of feldspar, and glazed by the same feldspar. It has the qualities of being light and transparent, of resisting heat, and of not being scratched by the steel point. This *porcelaine dure* perfected by fifty years of experiments, became, and still remains, the current porcelain of commerce. Finally, since 1849, the Sévres manufactory has perfected the decoration of this hard porcelain by applications of what is called *pâtes sur pâtes*, and by the creation of a palette of colored pastes.

For all domestic purposes the manufacture and decoration of *porcelaine dure* now seemed to be perfected. But from the artistic point of view the result obtained was not satisfactory, for the *porcelaine dure* is baked at a temperature so high that few colors can resist, and the consequence is that the palette of colors for what is called *grand feu*, is very limited. On the other hand the feldspar glaze prevents the penetration of muffle colors. In short the problem which ceramists have had before them ever since the sixteenth century, is to find a paste less permeable than the *pâte tendre* and less adamantine than the *pâte dure*, which admits only of surface decoration—a porcelain in short which would admit of the application of the enamels used by the Chinese, and not merely of coloring oxides which become rotated or run at the high temperature required for baking the ordinary *porcelaine dure*.

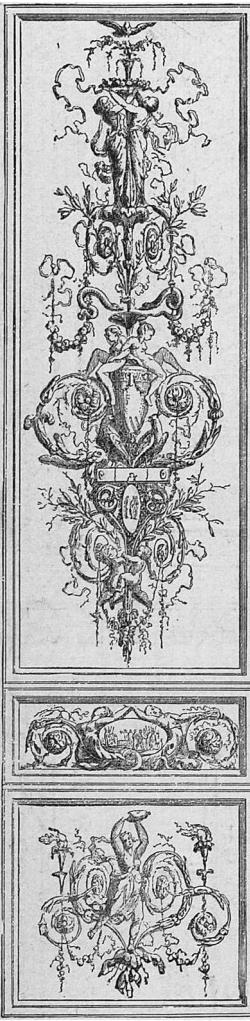
Such a porcelain the administration of Sévres has now discovered. Its composition remains for the present a secret for the exclusive profit of the Sévres manufactory. All I can do is to quote the words of the inventor, M. Lauth, who says that the *porcelaine nouvelle* has the following characteristics: "Its paste is slightly amber-toned; it accepts not only a glaze, a *grand feu*, but also plumbiferous glazes; it can be enriched with enamels; it can be baked at a temperature at which copper disappears only slowly, a fact which

has permitted us to reproduce all the fine colors obtained in China with that metal. The enamels having to be employed in "a flats," (i. e. in flat layers) the modeling of painting is impossible, and consequently they imply almost forcibly a complete modification in the art of decorating porcelain; perspective and miniature modeling have disappeared; blended colors are replaced by frank colors, generally bright enough and often transparent enough to show the details of the finest sculpture; finally the richness of the new palette of enamels permits a far greater variety of grounds of a glaze and a limpidity which the employment of ordinary colors cannot give."

In short, the *nouvelle porcelaine* is stated to possess the properties of the famous Chinese porcelain. Undoubtedly the discovery is of great interest and importance, and it is with no small curiosity that ceramists and amateurs are examining the vases, buires, potiches and various bibelots which the Sévres manufactory have submitted to their judgment. The porcelain seems good, the colors are good and often admirably combined. Most of the shapes are uncommon and there are many objects exhibited of which the silhouette is elegant and the decoration highly artistic. In one case in the middle of the exhibition room are shown a quantity of *flambé* vases and turquoise blue potiches of great beauty. These rare products, of which hitherto the Orientals have had a monopoly, M. Lauth now thinks he can manufacture currently and at reasonable prices. Finally to sum up my impression, I will say that the *porcelaine nouvelle* seems admirably suited for decorative objects, coupes, potiches, small vases, the thousand bibelots and knick-knacks which add to the grace and charm of an elegant interior.

The objects exhibited are, I consider, good specimens of French taste as far as form and composition are concerned. In color, however, I find very few objects of real charm, so few in fact that I am inclined to believe that the present administration of Sévres is not colorist. Finally with all its good taste and general excellence it must be confessed that Sévres at the present day produces but very few objects which tempt the refined amateur. What the reason is I do not know, unless it be that high civilization is fatal to art which flourishes best side by side with a certain degree of so-called barbarism.

I understand that, having now succeeded in the production of the *nouvelle porcelaine*, the administration of Sévres proposes to resume the manufacture of the old *pâte tendre* of which the qualities are so charming and so precious. Indeed the programme of Sévres at the present day is to pursue the progress of ceramic industries and to create a veritable school of ceramic art, rather than to be at all an industrial enterprise. Thus the fabrication of porcelain in the manufactory is divided into two distinct parts. On the one hand we have the vases and other objects such as the government is in the habit of offering as prizes at cattle shows, boat races, gymnastic contests, etc.; then we have objects a little more important, destined to be offered to artists, savants and distinguished persons who have rendered service to the state; finally we have table services made for the President and the Ambassadors of the Republic. Some of the objects of this category are sold at the manufactory, and the public annually buys to the amount of about \$20,000. But this current manufactory represents only a small part of the production of Sévres; its real object and principal aim is as M. Lauth tells us in a notice prefixed to the catalogue, to manufacture "fine pieces, veritable objects of art, worthy by the purity and elegance of their forms, by the beauty of the colors, by the perfection of the composition and execution, to do honor to France, and to spread far and wide the reputation of its products." This programme is admirable and by its exceptional character as a national and non-commercial enterprise Sévres is able to study a series of questions and resolve problems which it would be difficult for private individuals to undertake. Furthermore the results obtained, models, processes, recipes for colors, are at the disposal of all French manufacturers who ask for them, and the laboratory of Sévres is always ready to help manufacturers in their researches. In short, Sévres avoids entering into competition with private industry, and in order still more to accentuate its rôle as a ceramic school, it has reorganized and completed its museum and made it artistic instead of merely technological, and it has established a school—opened in 1879—where twenty students are taught drawing, modeling, and all the practical processes of the decoration of porcelain. This school is intended to create a choice body of decorators and designers acquainted with all the practical processes of ceramics, and the diploma granted by the Ecole de Sévres will secure the bearer a position in private industry or at Sévres itself.



A FRENCH DECORATIVE PANEL.